

DECOLONIAL INTERNATIONAL NETWORK

The Theoretical Foundation of the Bolivarian Revolution

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Introduction

How do you decide on charting a course for political movements fighting for liberation? In the socialist movement this is decided by theoretical considerations. The socialist movement has a body of theoretical literature that discusses political strategy from a theoretical point of view. The works of Marx, Engels and Lenin has been the guide for the socialist movement for many decades. The demise of the Soviet Union led to the demise of Marxism-Leninism as a narrative of liberation.

The Communist Party of China showed a remarkable flexibility in developing a theoretical framework to guide Chinese political strategy. The most remarkable theoretician in this regard is Deng Xiaoping. Deng's theoretical contributions are firmly rooted in Marxism-Leninism. When he developed the argument for reforms and opening up the Chinese economy to private enterprises and the introduction of markets, he used Marxist concepts. Deng starts with asking the basic question: what is the aim of socialism? He answers: *"The aim of our revolution is to liberate and expand the productive forces. Without expanding the productive forces, making our country prosperous and powerful, and improving the living standards of the people, our revolution is just empty talk... The Gang of Four said it was better to be poor under socialism than to be rich under capitalism. This is absurd. Of course, we do not want capitalism, but neither do we want to be poor under socialism."*¹

How will China develop its productive forces? With the concept of the socialist market economy. According to Deng *"It is wrong to maintain that a market economy exists only in capitalist society and that there is only 'capitalist' market economy. Why can't we develop a market economy under socialism? Developing a market economy does not mean practising capitalism. While maintaining a planned economy as the mainstay of our economic system, we are also introducing a market economy. But it is a socialist market economy. Although a socialist market economy is similar to a capitalist one in method, there are also differences between them. The socialist market economy mainly regulates interrelations between state-owned enterprises, between collectively owned enterprises and even between foreign capitalist enterprises. But in the final analysis, this is all done under socialism in a socialist society. We cannot say that market economy exists only under capitalism. Market economy was in its embryonic stages as early as feudal society. We can surely develop it under socialism. Similarly, taking advantage of the useful aspects of capitalist countries, including their methods of operation and management, does not mean that we will adopt capitalism. Instead, we use those methods in order to develop the productive forces under socialism. As long as learning from capitalism is regarded as no more than a means to an end, it will not change the structure of socialism or bring China back to capitalism."*²

So before putting the policy of reform into place, Deng had developed a theoretical argument as the basis for the policy. He call his theoretical framework *"Socialism with Chinese characteristics."*

Theory in the flesh

In Latin Abya Yala the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela is the most significant historical transformation since the Cuban Revolution. In 1998 Hugo Chavez and his socialist party won the presidential elections in Venezuela. Since then, the party has been in power by winning most of the elections ((presidential, state government, municipality, parliament). They have won all the presidential elections and controlled the national government on the basis of presidential elections.

What is the theoretical foundation of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela? It is not so much in written text, but in the practice of the revolution. Jeanne Henriquez, a leader of the social movement in Curaçao, calls this "theory in the flesh". By this she means, that there is theory in textbooks and theory in the actual practice in social movements. Leaders of social movement develop policies for their movement. They do it on the basis of creative and sound theoretical thinking. They have a clear analysis of the problems of the movement, the way to tackle them and the strategy for liberation. This might not be articulated in theoretical terms, not because there is no theory, but because the theory is immediately translated into policies. If you want to study the theory, then you need to study the thinking behind the policy. So there is a theoretical framework, but it might not be presented as such.

The concept of socialism of the 21st century

Chavez introduced the concept of socialism of the 21st century. This is not just a phrase, but a theoretical concept. The main values of 21st century socialism, according to Chavez, are liberty, equality, social justice, and sustainability. The way this is achieved is by democratic means: *"The only way to save the world is through socialism, but a socialism that exists within a democracy; there's no dictatorship here."*³

He gives an evaluation of the experience of socialism in the Soviet Union: *"Let us remember what happened in the Soviet Union: in the Soviet Union there was never democracy, there wasn't socialism, it was diverted and the leaders did not realize it, or if they did realize it they were incapable of changing things and it became a beaten empire. The fault does not lie solely with Soviet Union, the blame also lies with all of the external aggressions, economic sabotage, biological and bacterial wars, bombings and explosions in the Soviet oil industry, as well as the contradictions, the divisions, the culture. That is why the socialism of the XXI century, which has resurfaced here as if from the dead, is something new; it has to be truly new, and one of the things that is fundamentally new in our model is the democratic character, a new democratic hegemony which obliges us not to impose, but rather to convince, and that is where we are coming from: the subject of the media, communications, of our arguments, so that the whole country is aware of what we are presenting today; of how we can achieve it, of how we can make it happen. A change in culture. An impact on a cultural level is vital for the revolutionary process and for the construction of a XXI century socialist democracy in Venezuela."*⁴

The concept of socialism of the 21st century has far reaching theoretical and practical implications. The first implication is that there is no general concept of socialism that applied to all countries in all stages of modern history. The experience of Venezuela is different from the experience of other socialist countries. Cuba has its own history with its own peculiar characteristics. So does China. Venezuela the socialist party proved that power can be taken through parliamentary elections.

The second implication is that Marxist theoretical concepts might be modified in the light of the experiences of social movements in different countries.

The theory of the state

The Marxist-Leninist theory of the state is best formulated in Lenin's study titled "The State and Revolution". It was written in August and September 1917, when he was in

hiding from persecution of the Provisional Government, that came to power after the February Revolution of 1917. Lenin's view of the state is articulated as follows: *"The state is a special organization of force: it is an organization of violence for the suppression of some class. What class must the proletariat suppress? Naturally, only the exploiting class, i.e., the bourgeoisie. The working people need the state only to suppress the resistance of the exploiters, and only the proletariat can direct this suppression, can carry it out. For the proletariat is the only class that is consistently revolutionary, the only class that can unite all the working and exploited people in the struggle against the bourgeoisie, in completely removing it."*⁵

After the October revolution the short lived parliamentary system was replaced by a union of Soviets: the workers and peasant councils.

In Venezuela there are no workers and peasant councils to replace the parliament. Instead Chavez presented a new constitution in 1999 which approved by 72% the electorate on 15 December 1999 in a national vote.

The liberal parliamentary democracies are based on the concept of Trias Politica, the separation of powers whereby the state's government is divided into three branches: a legislature, an executive, and a judiciary.

The theoretical innovation in the Bolivarian revolution is the acknowledgement that there can be more than three powers of government. In Venezuela the constitution of the Bolivarian state acknowledges five branches of power. Article 136 says: *"Public Power is distributed among Municipal Power, that of the States Power and National Power. National Public Power is divided into Legislative, Executive, Judicial, Citizen and Electoral. Each of the branches of Public Power has its own functions, but the organs charged with exercising the same shall cooperate with one another in attaining the ends of the State."*⁶

Apart from the traditional legislative, executive and judicial branch, there are two other branches. Article 274 explains the tasks of Citizen Power: *"The organs exercising Citizen Power are charged, in accordance with this Constitution and with the law, with preventing, investigating and punishing actions that undermine public ethics and administrative morals; to see to sound management and legality in the use of public property, and fulfillment and application of the principle of legality in all of the State's administrative activities, as well as to promote education as a process that helps create citizenship, together with solidarity, freedom, democracy, social responsibility and work."*⁷ Citizen Power is exercised by the Republican Ethics Council, consisting of a representative of the People Defender's Office, the Office of Public Prosecutions and the Office of the General Comptroller of the Republic. The People Defender's Office is charged with the furtherance, defense and oversight of the rights and guarantees established under this Constitution and international treaties on human rights, in addition to defending the legitimate, collective and diffuse interest of the citizens. Article 292 explains what Electoral Power is: *"Electoral Power is exercised by the National Electoral Council as governing body, and by the latter's subordinate organs, the National Board of Elections, the Civil Status and Voter Registration Commission and the Commission on Political Participation and Financing, with organization and functioning as established under the pertinent organic law."*⁸ This branch is responsible for the organization of all elections: President, National Assembly, state governments (Venezuela is a federal state) and municipalities.

This constitution keeps the multiparty system in place with parliamentary elections, yet it adds something new that broadens the capabilities of the population to participate in the decision making process of the country.

The Constitution is not a theoretical document, but it is the result of theoretical thinking that Chavez and his companions have produced since they came into power.

If we are looking for the theoretical foundation of the Bolivarian revolution, then that is the way to go: start with the practice and try to reason about what theoretical concepts can be behind the practice.

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¹ Deng Xiaoping (n.d.), p. 171.

² Idem, p. 174.

³ Cited in: Patel, N. (2014), p. 57.

⁴ Chavez, H. (2012).

⁵ Lenin, V. (1918), p. 17.

⁶ Constitution of Venezuela (2012), p. 29.

⁷ Idem, p. 58.

⁸ Idem, p. 62.